

ARIZONA VETERANS' SERVICE ADVISORY COMMISSION
American Legion Post #32, 531 11th Ave., Safford, AZ 85546-3157

Saturday – February 11, 2006

M I N U T E S

Call to Order - The meeting was called to order at 10:06 a.m. by Chairman Ellis.

Members Present

Advisory Commission Members

Webb Ellis, Chairperson
Robert Boyd
Tom Dingwall
Linda Fulkerson
Mary Ellen Piotrowski, Vice Chairperson
Phillip Quochytewa
Kenneth Yamanouchi

Arizona Department of Veterans' Services

Gabe Forsberg, Strategic Planner
Lee Borgen, ADVS Vets' Benefit Counselor

Recognized Guests – Rebecca Phifer, Co-chair for the Arizona Veterans Task Force; Dr. Lester Potts, Chairperson – City of Tucson Veterans' Affairs Committee; Monica Cabrera, Public Information Officer - VA Regional Office; Dave Etter - American Legion Asst Sergeant at Arms Area A, George Sticklin – American Legion Post #32 Commander; Bob DiGirolamo, Commander of Disabled American Veterans; Donnell Gentry, Adjutant for Disabled American Veterans; Mr. T.C. Tso, Veteran Liaison/Executive Staff Assistant to the President & Vice President of the Navajo Nation; and Spencer Ralston – Associate Director, VA Hospital in Tucson.

Approval of Minutes - Minutes of the January 12, 2006 meeting were approved as written. Condolences were extended to the families and friends of the young Marine, Brandon Schuck from Safford, who was killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The Advisory Commission held its first meeting on an Indian reservation at the San Carlos Tribal Council meeting last evening. The purpose of the meeting was for the Advisory Commissioners to be briefed on issues of importance to Native American veterans.

Communications

There were two written responses from invitations to attend the Region 3 meeting in Safford: Congressman Grijalva and Senator McCain sent their regrets. (There was also a phone call from Rep. Diane McClure from the Arizona legislature saying that she was unable to attend the meeting.)

Agency Announcements and Updates

Legislation

Pat Chorpenning, ADVS Director, was unable to attend today's meeting to make his report because of scheduling conflicts. Chairman Ellis wanted the attendees to know how fortunate the veteran community is to have him as a champion for veteran causes. Director Chorpenning

also serves as the Governor's Policy Advisor on Military Affairs. He chaired the Arizona Veterans Task Force, the final report served as the basis for nearly all of the legislative initiatives. Becky Phifer, Co-Chair to the Arizona Veterans Task Force, was in attendance and was thanked for the role she played.

Chairman Ellis provided a summary of legislation of interest to veterans this year. This session has been one of the most important for Arizona veterans and many of the most pressing issues are contained within the Governor's budget. If all goes well with the Governor's budget and the proposed bills, the following actions will take place:

- Funding for a state veteran home in Tucson will be available. The number of beds needed for Arizona veterans will still be lacking after the second home has been built, but we will essentially double the number of state nursing home beds available.
- There is a serious lack of Veterans Benefits Counselors (VBCs) in the state to serve its 600,000 veterans. The proposed budget will obtain an additional 40 VBC.
- A second state veteran cemetery can be built in northern Arizona when certain funds have been reimbursed and the Sierra Vista cemetery receives adequate funding.
- There will be 5 veterans' One-Stop centers where veterans in rural Arizona will be provided an opportunity to learn about veterans benefits they have earned.

Strategic Plan Overview

The Advisory Commission has divided the state into various regions so that the Commissioners can be responsible for certain counties. The meeting today is the first one for Region 3 and the third that the Commission has held. Copies of the strategic plan are available on the table with other handouts.

Yuma Stand Down

Linda Fulkerson spoke with Bill Thornton, Chairman of the committee responsible for putting on the first Stand Down in Yuma. They have opened a bank account and are obtaining donations of various items and services to support the stand down. Dates for the Yuma Stand Down are March 3, 4, & 5, 2006.

Kitty Tennis from American Legion #32 assisted the groups hosting the Tucson Stand Down. She would like to get one going in Safford for local veterans and wanted to ask for assistance. Local veterans service organizations need to get involved.

Open Discussion / For the Good of the Order

Commissioner Yamanouchi suggested that there are many veterans who are not familiar with the term "DD214" and may not know that it is their military separation documentation. He also felt that it is a critical first step in filing claims for benefits, but many veterans (or their families) do not know how to obtain a copy. Copies may be ordered online from the Internet at www.vetrecs.archives.gov.

Comment cards and exchange in open forum:

American Indian Affairs

- Ramiro Bustamante asked that the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services consider adding the Pasqua Yaqui Tribe to its travel itinerary. Chairman Ellis promised to ask that the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services look in to it.

Access to VA Health Care

- One attendee asked why he has not received his benefits from a claim he initiated in 1974. Lee Borgen, VBC, said that the VA is unable to approve claims because it has not been provided with sufficient evidence of the claim. She recommended that the person request all medical records as an important first step. Each and every veteran deserves to be told exactly why the claim is not approved. If it has taken longer than 3 years to process a claim, there is definitely a problem and it will not be resolved without the intervention of a certified VBC.
- Growth in the Safford area is phenomenal and the number of veterans who are having transportation issues is increasing. Having served as the VFW service officer, the veteran offering the comment card believes that a van would solve veterans' transportation problems getting to the VA Hospital. He also mentioned that when he visited the VA Clinic in Safford, it was closed around noon. He suggested that the clinic staff put up a sign that shows that the office is closed for lunch or they stagger their lunch breaks.
- Irene Shafer, Safford VA Clinic, agreed that there are significant transportation issues. She apologized for the clinic being closed and assured him that this was an unusual situation. There is a serious need for transportation for rural veterans and Ms. Shafer asked if there was a possibility of getting a van or shuttle for transportation for veterans who need to go to Tucson for appointments.
- Bill Gastro, a veteran from Willcox, wanted to publicly announce his satisfaction with the Safford VA Clinic. He has never been treated any nicer and seen a more efficiently run clinic. He brings his brother up here for care as well and thanked Irene Shafer for her hard work. The attendees applauded his comments.
- Janie Miller uses a van in Casa Grande to get to her appointments at the Tucson VA. She said that the van driver stated that he must leave Tucson at 3:00 p.m., which means that she cannot use the van when she has a 4:00 p.m. appointment.
- Spencer Ralston informed the group that the VA tries to set appointment times earlier in the day for those relying on volunteer van drivers. When it is not possible, they put the vet in a hotel overnight so they can get a ride the next day.
- Ted Fisher, DAV Tucson, runs the van program and offered suggestions. The DAV van program is run by the VA Volunteer Services program, and the vans are owned by the VA. If you are riding in a DAV van, you can let the volunteer driver know that you have an appointment that is later than the normal departure time. They will try to accommodate unusual appointments.
- Spencer Ralston is very appreciative of the DAV for their generous donation of vans for use by the VA Hospitals. The volunteer drivers are frequently leaving their homes at 3:30 from certain locations (such as Yuma). Dave Etter, American Legion, spoke about a van that was donated to the local post. They had arranged for volunteer drivers and the van was properly equipped and roadworthy. The obstacle to their using the van to drive veterans to the Tucson VA was the prohibitive cost of car insurance.
- Ramiro Bustamante suggested that veterans organizations ask gaming tribes to fund vans and said that they have been very helpful to the Yaqui tribe.
- Bob DiGirolamo, DAV Commander, mentioned that the DAV is not the only veterans service organization that can donate the van to the VA. So long as the van is government property, the VA can fund the insurance. This year, they are spending \$78,000 for vans for Tucson and Phoenix. At the end of the useful life of the van, the VA returns it to the donating organization.
- Mr. Bustamante suggested that interested posts or chapters of non profit organizations can obtain surplus vehicles by using the internet. He said that the Logistics Department of the US Government has \$17 trillion of surplus. The only requirements are that you

provide evidence of your non-profit status and that you can send someone to drive the van back from the location in Colorado.

- Commissioner Piotrowski also serves as the Chair for the Unified Arizona Veterans. The topic of van transportation is appropriate for her organization to consider. She described the UAV as a consortium of 30+ veterans organizations that meet monthly and get involved of issues of importance to organizations statewide. Meetings are open to the public (1st Saturday of every month).
- One comment card asked how the Commission can help veterans with federal issues. The Commission can make recommendations to the federal lawmakers under certain circumstances. An important example: the Commission wrote letters to all members of Congress to strongly protest the drastic cuts to the VA budget.
- Steve Abel, MOAA in Green Valley, asked how the Advisory Commissioners can help officially communicate issues to federal law makers. Chairman Ellis said that every individual needs to communicate with their member of Congress. Grass roots was what got us concurrent receipt, TriCare for Life, and other important benefits. It is incumbent upon veterans organizations (rather than the Governor) to provide the contacts by all of its membership to ensure that Congress knows about your needs.
- A question from a local member dealt with a new ID card issued by the VA (which no longer has the social security number on it). He asked if this was an insurance card that would be accepted by a hospital in an emergency situation. Mr. Ralston said that the law allows the VA to pay for emergency care (any vet who has been seen within the past two years).
- A 100% disabled veteran spoke up. She incurred numerous transportation expenses trying to find a medical facility able to treat a suspected heart attack. The Tucson VA didn't pay her bills and she is still paying off the bills. Mr. Ralston asked her to supply him with information so that he could look into it for her.
- Janie Miller, VFW Adjutant from Casa Grande, said that she preferred to be seen locally a non-VA clinic instead of driving to the Tucson VA. Mr. Ralston said that non-VA care is much more expensive than care provided at the VA. If the funding seems inadequate now, it would be impossible for the Tucson VA to function if veterans were allowed to routinely obtain medical care outside the VA system and seek VA reimbursement. Care provided within the VA is extremely cost effective.

Access to Other VA Benefits:

- Ted Fisher, DAV Tucson, said that veterans must be responsible for confirming the address on file for veterans on the VA computer system. There are serious delays in receiving claim information because the address on file is not correct.
- Monica Cabrera, Public Information Officer with the VA Regional Office, said she has the toll-free number on brochures available today (with other helpful materials). The number can be used by veterans to make address changes and do other business with the VA. You can also query the claim status by telephone and help speed up the claim. She invited veterans and their families to help themselves to the various materials she brought from Phoenix.
- One spouse of a veteran said that she used the 1-800 to make an address change recently. She got through immediately and the system works well.
- Dr. Lester Potts, City of Tucson Veterans Affairs Committee, said that we need more VBCs at the VA Medical Centers and more volunteers. The ADVS has local benefits counselors, but he believes that he needs more volunteers who come to the VA. Chairman Ellis said that for a VBC to be fully qualified, it takes extensive training and at least three years of experience to become proficient.
- John Rains, a WWII and Korean veteran in a new Marine Corps Detachment 1212, spoke about how inadequately veterans benefits are funded. He felt that the state

needs a viable grievance committee where he could file a grievance against state employees. He felt that the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services VBC who worked with him was not properly trained and did not have the resources to do his job properly. Mr. Rains said that the VBC was not given a computer and he hand wrote out comments from his meeting to be entered into a computer at a later time. He said that he spoke to the Assistant Deputy Director in charge of the VBCs and she said that she'll look into it. The Assistant Deputy Director hasn't called him back and it has been over a year since he called.

- Mr. Rains is also very concerned about increased taxes because he is on a fixed income. He believes that veterans must receive some kind of relief. All we get is rhetoric – thank you for your comments, but they don't get any real action. He spoke of waiting 9 weeks to get an MRI and was unhappy that it had to be scheduled on a Saturday. His hearing aids continue to be a problem, but he didn't want to debate the gentleman from VA during this meeting. The VA Clinic here is one of the best that he has ever seen. Sometimes he waits 2 hours for his appointment, but they are interested in his care and give him their full attention. He said he is always treated very courteously at the Tucson VA. He said that the problem is one of funding. The Tucson VA is taking in additional patients from OEF/OIF and the funding has not changed (or at least hasn't kept up with the patient load). Chairman Ellis agreed that VA Health Care is vastly under-funded. This Commission has nothing to do with federal funding, but they all believe the VA should be fully funded.

Legislative Issues:

- Commissioner Boyd pointed out the minutes of the January Commission meeting (copies of which were available), has a list of bills that veterans should support is on the bottom of the first page. He encouraged all the attendees to call their legislators to support those bills. Even if your lawmaker supports the bill, they need to hear from you. He suggested that veterans need to "worry" their legislators about these bills.
- Becky Phifer, Co-chair of the Arizona Veterans Task Force and also sits on the Governor's Task Force on Developmental Disabilities, agreed with Commissioner Boyd. The legislators frequently do not know anything about the bills and they have to hear from their constituents. If they do not understand the issues at hand, lawmakers automatically vote "no" on bills. Constituent comments are very important to legislators and this is an election year.
- Bob DiGirolamo, DAV Commander, said that Congress votes on the VA budget every single year. Because it requires a vote and is not "mandatory," he believes that the veterans will continue with these periodic battles. The VA Health care at the national level needs be mandatory funded.

There being no further discussion, Chairman Ellis again thanked Post #32 and all attendees.

Adjournment – Meeting adjourned at 12:05 p.m. The next regular meeting will be held at 10:00 a.m. on Thursday, March 9, 2006, at the Arizona State Veteran Home, located at 4141 N. Third Street, Phoenix, AZ 85012.